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Guatemala, Factor 16: Education

Guatemala: From the Classroom to the Farm

In today's world, life is all about things. People work hard to buy the best and newest products, even if they do not really need them. For the people living in impoverished countries, the story is very different. Citizens of countries like Guatemala are often struggling to survive. Many of the people are malnourished, illiterate, and struggling to make a living wage. They work hard not to buy new things, but to feed their families and to survive for just a few more days. The children in Guatemala are suffering along with their parents. Children are often forced to drop out of school to help their family stay afloat. Without education for Guatemalan children, this situation will never change. It is our duty as a society to make things better for the people who need it the most.

Guatemala is the second poorest country in Central America. In 2013, the population was just over fifteen million people. Families are typically made up of a father, mother, and their children. Wealthier families also have other relatives and orphaned children that live with them (Guatemalans). Families range anywhere from three to nine people in size. It is not uncommon for women to have up to seven children (Tak and Gendell). Women and men both typically hold jobs outside of the home, so the oldest children have to look out for their siblings.

A common diet in Guatemala consists of what a family grows on their farm, or in the case of an urban family, whatever they can buy at the market. Most people eat tortillas, black beans, rice, eggs and cheese. Chicken, turkey, and beef are the most common meats. (Guatemala). Much of the population is undernourished. Education is very poor in Guatemala. Twenty five percent of the country is illiterate. Only three out of ten children graduate from the sixth grade. The schools are poorly funded, the materials are outdated and inadequate, and the teachers are not properly trained. Schooling is expensive for Guatemalans, so there is very little money to spare for things like healthcare. Many Guatemalans lack access to healthcare because of their locations in rural areas. There is not very much public spending on healthcare, leaving many of the poor people helpless (Gragnotati and Marini).

The typical farm in Guatemala is two hectares (Berdegue and Fuentealba). Farming is a common profession in Guatemala, because fifty percent of the nation is farmland. The main cash crops of Guatemala are coffee, sugar and bananas. Guatemala is the second largest exporter of sugar in Latin America (Niezen). The main subsistence crops are corn, beans, and rice (Guatemala- Agriculture). A majority of what the farmers grow is used to feed their families, leaving a smaller selection of crops for farmers to actually sell. Many of the farmers do not use pesticides or chemical fertilizers because they discovered it was hard on the land. Farmers now accept methods that are safer, such as using compost, traps, and organic repellants. Crop diversification is also making the land more fertile and tolerable to climate change (Reynolds).

A major barrier to agricultural productivity in Guatemala is its natural landscape. Guatemala has many active volcanoes. Guatemala is prone to earthquakes (Contributing Factors). Hurricanes also pose a threat to Guatemala because one border faces the Caribbean Sea and another border faces the Pacific Ocean. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch swept through Guatemala, destroying fields, homes, and taking the lives of many Guatemalans. Then once again in 2005, Hurricane Stan arrived in Guatemala, destroying any progress since Hurricane Mitch. Erosion has also become a major issue, due to excessive land clearing to create more farm land. All of these natural barriers make it hard for Guatemalans to successfully grow crops.

Another barrier to agricultural productivity is the expenses associated with it. If Guatemala has a dry spell, there is little that the indigenous farmers can do about it. Many of them do not have the ability to pay whatever it takes to keep their crops alive. In turn, they are not able to make enough money to pay for their farm or to keep their family from starvation. In an article by Oxfam America, an indigenous Guatemalan farmer was interviewed. When Siriaco Mejia was asked about his corn crop he said, "We could see the corn cobs, but when we opened them up, many were totally empty," Mejia says standing in his field, "We got almost nothing this year" (Guatemala: Hunger). The price of keeping crops alive is too high for the poor farmers of the region.

There are also barriers to earning a living wage in Guatemala. A large percentage of the people living in Guatemala earn their living working as farmers. In Guatemala there is a national dispute over what the legal minimum wage should be. Currently, many of the people living in Guatemala are being paid as low as three dollars per hour (Guatemala- Working). It is also hard to survive when crop yields are not overabundant. Many people are forced to give up their small farms and work for another farmer. Some Guatemalans migrate to cities to become street vendors in order to make money (Guatemalans).

It is difficult for people in rural areas of Guatemala to access food markets. In cities there are vendors selling fruits and vegetables, but in the countryside, it is a free-for-all. Everyone is dependent on their farms in order to survive. Whatever the people want to eat they have to grow or make themselves. Because many of the families have low incomes, it is more affordable for them to make food from scratch. This leads to the issue of adequate nutrition. Fifty percent of children under the age of five are malnourished, and seventy percent of indigenous children have been diagnosed with malnutrition (Guatemala: Hunger). Families have an even harder time surviving when their crops are not able to survive, which happens more often than not. The typical Guatemalan diet also does not have many nutrients in it. Many Guatemalans are plagued with iron, Vitamin A, or iodine deficiencies. A majority of Guatemalans survive on foods like beans, corn, sugar, and some spices. Also, many people in rural areas can only afford to eat one or two meals per day (Walter). The combination of these two things leaves many citizens of Guatemala hungry and malnourished.

Currently in Guatemala, education feels like a burden to most families. Parents are losing potential income by sending their children to school instead of sending them into the workforce. Education in Guatemala is also expensive for parents. They spend a large amount of their income on school fees, supplies, textbooks, and uniforms (Guatemala- Global). Many parents do not want to spend money on school when it could be better spent on things like food or bills. If there was a way for children to go to school at a reduced price or for free, many parents would be eager to allow their children the privilege of an education.

The education situation in Guatemala is very severe. Close to twenty five percent of the country's population is illiterate. In the indigenous regions, sixty percent of the population is illiterate. Education is a rare opportunity for children in Guatemala, and opportunities are even rarer for girls. Less than thirty percent of indigenous girls are enrolled in secondary school. "Of the two million children in Guatemala that do not attend school, the majority are indigenous girls living in rural areas" (Guatemala- Global).

The trends for education are constant, but is looking towards improvement. As more organizations are stepping in to aid the situation, more kids are going to school and getting further in the education system. Improving this factor could bring higher earnings to future generations. It also means more knowledge to apply to creating successful farms. Women would also be able to get higher paid jobs and have a life outside of the home.

Issues like population growth and cost effect schooling in a large way. Population growth causes overcrowding in schools. Also, as mothers have more children, the older children are forced to give up school to take care of their siblings. The cost of schooling makes life hard for Guatemalans. If the parents are unable to pay for their kid's schooling, they are unable to attend.

The first proposed solution to getting more children enrolled in school is to create a way for the kids to profit financially from attending school. Many parents cannot afford to send their children to school because it is so expensive. Schools should create a large garden where the students can learn to grow crops and then sell them at local markets. The money they make can be used to pay for students' tuition. The community could also play a part by creating a community garden that gives its profits to the school. The Guatemalan government and other countries' governments, such as the United States', could provide money for tools and other supplies for the garden. Due to the struggling Guatemalan government, more outside help may be required. Guatemala's citizens will also need to raise awareness about the education situation. This may mean organizing campaigns and fundraisers to spread the message. Agricultural organizations could help with startup funding and teach the students about how to grow the crops. Some examples of organizations would be the Peace Corps and also universities such as Purdue. They could send volunteers to teach methods and also become lending hands in the start-up process. Larger businesses like Beck's Hybrids or Dow Agrosiences could also get involved. They could be responsible for monetary donations as well as aiding in the educational aspects and seed and pesticide donations. Businesses, organizations, and foundations could help to relieve the financial and educational burdens that Guatemala would face in improving education.

Many of the teachers in Guatemala's schools are improperly trained. Students who are studying education in the United States could perform their student teaching in Guatemalan schools in order to give students a better education. The teachers could also give the students and their parents English classes. This gives the parents and the children more job opportunities. Universities in the United States would be responsible for recruiting the teachers and leaders in Guatemalan towns would be in charge of finding community members and families to act as host families for the teachers.

Education is the answer to turn around the poverty in Guatemala. More educated people will lead to more higher paying jobs and the ability to earn a living wage. If we continue to ignore what is happening around the world, we cannot make it a greater place for our children and grandchildren. Robert F. Kennedy once said, "The purpose of life is to contribute in some way to make things better." It is our duty to change what we can while we can. It is our duty as a society to make things better for the people who need it the most.

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